DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 369 541 PS 022 303

AUTHOR Schomburg, Roberta
TITLE A Developmental Approach to Conflict Resolution.
PUB DATE Nov 93
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Anaheim, CA, November 10-14, 1993).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Aggression; *Child Behavior; *Conflict Resolution; Developmental Stages; Early Childhood Education; Educational Environment; Interpersonal Communication; Peer Relationship; Self Control; *Social Development; *Teacher Role; Teacher Student Relationship; *Young Children
IDENTIFIERS *Developmentally Appropriate Programs

ABSTRACT

To ensure that children will be able to learn to resolve interpersonal conflicts, teachers need to examine the ways in which they resolve conflicts with the young children under their care. Teachers also need to ensure that children: (1) possess environments where they trust that they will be safe and well-cared for; (2) develop a sense of autonomy, power, and control over themselves and their own actions, seeing the limits of their power over others; and (3) learn to manage and control aggressive impulses, channeling those impulses into other growth-promoting activities, such as art, play, and storytelling. Once children have achieved these abilities, they can begin to understand the concepts of conflict resolution and mediation that are appropriate as they become older children. (MDM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 369 541

A Developmental Approach to Conflict Resolution*

Roberta Schomburg, Ph.D.

Director, Graduate Program in Early Childhood Education

Carlow College

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Roberta Schomburg
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

As violence continues to erupt in our cities and communities, adults are struggling to find ways to help children learn settle conflicts without resorting to violence. Conflict resolution techniques and mediation strategies have been proven effective in our schools and the hope is that such techniques will begin to reduce the amount of violence that is evident in our children's lives. For conflict resolution techniques to be effective, however, children must have the ability to take another person's perspective and the ability to control their anger and actions. When dealing with young children, these abilities have often not yet been achieved. Teachers report an underlying rage in many of the children in their classrooms and much evidence of poor impulse control in the very children who need help dealing with conflicts. When conflict resolution techniques don't work, what is a teacher to do?

If we look at conflict resolution from a developmental point of view, it's easy to see that traditional approaches will not work unless children have achieved the developmental abilities of trusting in others, feeling in control of themselves, and learning to handle aggressive feelings. Only then can we move into more traditional conflict resolution strategies.

The three tasks that teachers of young children must focus on are typically developed during the first four or five years of life. The sense of trust is usually established by two

PS 022303

years of age; autonomy and control by three years, and the ability to manage aggression at four or five years of age. Yet teachers report their preschool and kindergarten classrooms have many children who do not seem to have mastered these tasks. The role of the teacher then becomes that of a developmental facilitator...one who helps the child achieve the developmental abilities that are the precursors for later abilities to use conflict resolution techniques. When children feel that they can have trust in others, when they have a chance to feel empowered through their own sense of autonomy, and when adults help them sort out the difference between feeling angry and acting on that anger, we can begin to expect children to try and take another's perspective in conflict situations.

Establishing a Sense of Trust

For children to begin to understand concepts of peace and justice, they must have a fairly firm sense of trust: trust that others will keep them safe, trust that they can have an effect on their world, and trust that they will have all that they need (perhaps not all that they want, but all that they need). Adults often move too quickly into forcing children to share their belongings, before children trust enough that they will not lose their possessions altogether by giving them up to another. Learning to share, to take turns, and to give up a toy at the request of another child (or an adult) will depend on how able the child is to trust in others.

How do we support the sense of trust in young children? With infants and young toddlers, the answer is to provide consistent, warm and loving care, meeting their needs with prompt responses, providing a safe and caring environment, and assuring strong attachments with parents and caregivers. When children reach the preschool years without the sense of trust, teachers must acknowledge that typical preschool strategies may not be effective. For

instance, some children may need more nurturing than would be expected; others may test out the adult's availability by requesting attention, affection, and one-to-one interactions. An example of such behavior is a situation observed in a Head Start classroom:

> Jeremy was in the hall putting on his jacket when the teacher told the children that they had to try to zip their jackets...but that if they couldn't , she would help them. While the adult was fastening someone's boots, Jeremy very competently put on his jacket, zipped it up...then unzipped it and tugged on the teacher's jacket saying, "Ms. A., I tried!"

What Jeremy wanted was for the teacher to demonstrate her caring by zipping his coat for him. And Ms. A. did just that! She stooped down, zipped Jeremy's coat, and watched him bounce off toward the playground, secure in his knowledge that his teacher was there for him and would meet his needs.

How often have we been in such situations where the inclination might be to say, "Oh, Jeremy, you can do this yourself!!" For children who are still struggling to develop a healthy sense of trust, adult interactions must be consistent, supportive, and responsive. Only then can children feel able to be generous and caring toward others! Children cannot accommodate to the wishes of others until they trust that their own needs will be met. Children must also feel that adults will keep them safe. In one classroom a child was observed striking out at another with seemingly no provocation. When asked, the child responded, "But he was looking at me!" When children are concerned about their safety they often resort to "hitting back first." For this particular child, who did not have a firm sense of self and body boundaries, a look was as much an act of aggression as a physical response would have been. When children have difficulties trusting others, they often react out of fear: striking out at others because they do not feel sure that adults can or will

protect them. We must assure children that we can keep them safe from other children by not tolerating children's hurting one and another, and by being ever vigilant and available so that we stop children in the act of aggression

Achieving a Sense of Autonomy

Children's inclination to resolve conflicts peaceably will depend to a large extent on their their feelings of power and control. When adults continually put young children in the position of feeling powerless and ineffectual, children will be more inclined to try to exert power over other children who may appear weaker and more vulnerable.

Children begin to develop ways of resolving conflicts during the stage of autonomy, when the struggle of defining "me" and "not-me" is at its peak. The strategies that emerge in the toddler's interactions with primary caregivers around conflicts are those strategies that children will fall back on in their struggles to resolve conflicts with others. If every act of self-expression is thwarted and suppressed by those in power (parents, teachers, caregivers), the child will find ways to gain power indirectly. When the powerful adults have to win every conflict (even over the most trivial thing), and when conflicts are continually charged with temper tantrums on both the part of the child and the adult (screaming, shouting, demanding compliance), we can hardly expect the child to internalize a more peaceful approach to conflicts. While adults must help children learn to state their own wishes and take some control over themselves, teachers and parents must also be careful that children of this stage are not permitted to bully adults or other children, or to make demands that reduce the autonomy of other children at the center or in the family.

Since children's autonomy struggles can sometimes trigger long-dormant feelings of loss of power and control in adults, it helps for teachers and caregivers to examine their own

attitudes and responses to power and authority. Is it important for the adult to "be the boss" or can the adult allow children to demonstrate autonomy without feeling threatened by loss of power of control? And can adults feel confident enough about limit-setting to know when children are moving beyond autonomy over themselves and becoming tyrants over others to set the boundaries that young children need? Is this limit setting carried out in ways that support the child's sense of trust and self-esteem? These are questions adults must ask when relating to children around issues of power and control. Children must experience ways of resolving conflicts with adults that allow them to develop a sense of autonomy before they can settle disputes with other children. When they feel competent and successful in managing their own destinies, they will be more able to compromise and participate in the normal give-and-take needed to negotiate relationships with others.

Managing Aggressive Feelings

There is an unprecedented contagion of violence in our society with children being exposed to violence in real life as well as on television. While we know that exposure to violence has a detrimental effect on children, many do not realize that for young children, what goes on during a television broadcast is just as much a part of their experience as witnessing the real event. Children do not consistently distinguish between reality and what they see on television. So what we tend to model for children as ways to resolve conflicts becomes greatly skewed. Children learn that when you are angry with someone, you can punch, karate-chop, or shoot that person. Even if children never see real adults behave that way, their vicarious experiences support violence as a way of resolving conflicts.

Therefore, it becomes extremely important to limit children's exposure to violence while modeling for them more appropriate ways to settle disagreements. Even within this framework, aggressive feelings can often get out of hand during the preschool years.

Children who "know" that hitting is wrong may still revert to hitting or punching when they are angry. They are usually sorry afterwards, but did not have the ability to stop themselves during the act. This is where adult support becomes extremely critical. Teachers and caregivers must become adept at recognizing the signals that a child is losing control and intervene. Scolding and reprimanding after the fact has very little effect on the child's ability to learn to control impulses. In fact, punishment often makes children become more hostile and aggressive.

Once children have achieved the ability to control their impulses, they look for ways to represent anger and hostility symbolically---thus the typical increase in superhero play during the preschool years. Such representations must be differentiated from actual expressions of aggression. Pretending can be a way for children to learn to manage the strong feelings of fear, vulnerability, and hostility that exist in preschoolers. Sometimes in role-playing situations, children have difficulty keeping aggression within bounds. When aggressive play reverts to raw aggression, it must be stopped! But often teachers can help children channel aggressive lay into other activities. Creating miniaturized versions of the play situation with play figures, or moving the play to higher levels by introducing rescue and life-saving props can be ways to help children work through aggressive feelings and begin to identify with the rescuer, rather than the victim or aggressor.

What is most important to recognize is that children who become obsessed with aggressive play are communicating to adults some real concerns: a sense of vulnerability, a fear of violent intrusions or retaliation, or a concern about the inner feelings of anger and hostility toward those they love. Stopping aggressive play alone will not change these concerns. We must help children learn to work through the difficulties--and pretend play can be one way of doing that.

Summary

To assure ourselves that children will be able to learn to resolve conflicts, we must first examine the way we resolve conflicts with the children for whom we care. They must have environments where they trust that they will be safe and well-cared for. They must develop a sense of control over themselves and their own actions, seeing the limits of their power over others. And finally, they must learn to manage and control aggressive impulses, channeling those feelings into other growth-promoting activities, such as art, play, storytelling and other creative experiences. Once children have achieved these abilities, they can begin to understand the concepts of conflict resolution and mediation that are appropriate for older children.

Suggested Readings:

Carlsson-Paige, N. & Levin, D.E. (1990) Who's calling the shots? How to respond effectively to children's fascination with war play and war toys. Santa Cruz, CA: New Society Publishers.

Carlsson-Paige, N. & Levin, D.E. (1987). The war play dilemma: Balancing needs and values in the early childhood classroom. New York: Teachers College Press..

Erikson, E. H. (1953). Childhood and society. New York: Norton.

Garbarino, J., Dubrow, N, Kostelny, K. & Pardo, C. (1992). Children in danger: coping with the consequences of community violence. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

May, R. (1981). Power and innocence: A search for the sources of violence. New York: Dell.

McCracken, J. B. (Ed.) (1986). Reducing stress in young children's lives. Washington, D.C.: NAEYC.

Paley, V. (1984). Boys and girls: Superheroes in the doll corner. Chicago: University.

Paley, V. (1984). Bad guys don't have birthdays: Fantasy play at four. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

*This article is based on a presentation given by the author at the 1993 NAEYC Annual Conference in Anaheim, California.